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Le Livre des écorchés: Proust, Céline et la Grande Guerre. Par Hervé G. Picherit

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Le Livre des écorchés: Proust, Céline et la Grande Guerre. BY HERVÉ. G. PICHERIT. Paris: CNRS Editions, 2016. 367pp.

As one of the finest portraits of society up to and beyond World War I and, arguably, the most shattering chronicle of the experience of the war and its aftermath, Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* and Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* offer two complementary modernist engagements at the threshold of the Great War. Reading the two authors in parallel, Hervé G. Picherit sets out to assess their reaction to this collective catastrophe against the wider collapse of psychic, family and social structures. Contrary to what one might expect, at no point does the author engage in any detailed reading of the war chapter in *Le Temps retrouvé* ('M. de Charlus pendant la guerre, ses opinions, ses plaisirs'), nor of the experience of war in *Voyage au bout de la nuit*. Rather, drawing on the theoretical metaphor of the skin borrowed from psychoanalysts Didier Anzieu and Didier Houzel, the first part engages with the two authors' condition as 'écorchés', whose renewal of their own skin enables them to 'instaurer une nouvelle peau communautaire' (23). After discussion of the theoretical concept of the skin, chapters II to V focus on the personal traumas undergone by Proust and Céline, the former's illness and homosexuality entering into conflict with a family imaginary shaped by the father's treatises on hygiene, the latter facing the abyss between a heroic ideal upheld in a fantasy family genealogy and the reality of the battlefield. Drawing on their own experience, yet eschewing any autobiographical attribution, both authors explode traditional genre boundaries, transgressing the ontological frontier between reality and fiction. The second part examines the social function the two writers assign to their works in the context of the extension of the individual condition of the 'écorché' to an entire nation. Picherit mobilises the image of the destroyed church that figures prominently in both Proust and Céline as a figuration that divides the world into a 'before' and 'after' the catastrophe of the Great War. Yet, where Proust, drawing on a prophetic tradition, promises renewal through personal introspection, on the contrary for Céline adherence to a community comes at the price of abdicating selfhood. The last chapter is exemplary in its analysis of a feminine genealogy Céline constructs for himself in contrast with the traditional iconography of heroic masculinity, yet on which he also draws in the 1950s to rehabilitate himself from public opprobrium. Vastly different from Proust in style and world view, yet also disturbingly close, as the comparative reading brings to the fore, Céline 'cherche [...] à imposer son écrit comme une espèce de Nouveau Testament "littéraire" censé remplacer l'Ancien – le proustien' (336). Read together, the two authors' response to the catastrophe of war opens up refreshing perspectives for thinking about the relation between the Self and the Other in today's world. It is a pity that the book has neither bibliography nor index.

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